

Cliffnotes, June 25, 2000 AU

by Chance

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 Author's notes: Thank you Shannon for the beta This is for Holly b/c she wanted it; Happy Birthday Holly!
> For AT, I miss you.

> ****

> "Hey Daddy, lookit this."

> Lucas looked down as Cailin ran over to him, her little hands clutching a piece of paper close to her chest. He waited until she had reached him and scooped her up in his arms, wondering what was so important about the file.

> "Look what I found," she said breathlessly, waving the pale paper around in triumph.

> Lucas ducked his head back -- trying to avoid getting whacked with the paper -- and took it from her hand; juggling until he had her firmly settled on his hip so he could take a look at what was so important.

> "Cailin..." he said, turning slightly pale. "Where did you get this? It's from Commander Ford's personnel file."

> Cailin grinned up at him, blue eyes squinting from delight. "Dr. Kristin was cleaning up her office and a whole bunch of them fell off her desk." She flung her arms out wide -- trying to demonstrate how many files fell -- and narrowly missed smacking Lucas in the face. "She was real mad, but I helped her clean it all up."

> "That was really nice of you, Sweetie, but why do you have this one now? Why didn't you give it back to her?" Lucas asked, craning his neck and peering around the bulkhead into Kristin's office.

> The doctor was currently standing in the middle of her very messy office, arms crossed tightly across her chest and a frown upon her face. The teenager quickly ducked back around and returned his attention to Cailin. hoping Kristin hadn't seen him.

> "I had to show you something! It's really 'portant." Cailin exclaimed; paying no mind when Lucas waved a hand telling her to lower her voice. "Look," she pointed a short finger at one of the first lines under Ford's picture. "It's his birthday tomorrow and he didn't tell no one." She fixed her father with a triumphant gaze, waiting for his reaction to her news.

> Lucas' brow furrowed in confusion. Cailin was right; Commander Ford's birthday was the next day. Why hadn't the man told anyone? It wasn't like he didn't have friends on the boat. Hell, Ben would throw a monster blow out if he so much as sniffed that there was an excuse to - Oh, that was why.

> From what he knew of Ford - admittedly it wasn't much -- the older man seemed to be a private kind of person, and he and Ben had clashed on more than one occasion. Most likely Ford just hadn't wanted to put up with any of Ben's "plans" and had decided to keep his birthday to himself. Still, it would be lonely for the officer to spend it all by himself -- no one should be alone on their birthday.

> "So?" Cailin said, lips pursed in annoyance at the delay. "What we gonna do about it?"

> Lucas allowed a grin to break out on his face as he leaned over to whisper in his daughter's ear. The little girl broke out in a delighted giggle and quickly clamped a hand over her mouth trying to stifle it. Father and daughter left the medbay quickly, previous projects forgotten in favor of this new one.

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> The next day Lucas and Cailin found themselves staking out the commander's door, waiting for the right moment to spring their "surprise" on the unsuspecting man. Much of last night and that morning had been spent in secret; the two working on their project until it was perfect.

> "Daddy, here he comes. Shh," Cailin whispered loudly.

> Lucas rolled his eyes at Cailin's "whisper" -- really more of a quiet shout -- and readied himself for the "coming attraction." He hoped this was appreciated and that the commander didn't think they were being presumptuous. It was worth it in either case; Lucas had spent far too many birthdays by himself and knew what it felt like to be lonely. If he could help anyone feel happy on there birthday then he was willing to do it...even if it wasn't appreciated.

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> Commander Ford walked tiredly back to his quarters, for once glad that his shift was over. It was draining having to pretend like nothing was wrong -- especially when Katie stared at him with those all-knowing eyes of hers. He didn't want people to know about his birthday and if anyone was going to find out about it, he figured it would be Katie. She was a great person to have at your side during duty, but she was nosy as hell as well and would have tried to set something up for his birthday. He didn't want that.

> He hadn't really celebrated his birthday since he'd turned 21 and a group of his shipmates had taken him out on his first "legal" bender. The young man had been trying to forget that no one in his family had called to wish him a Happy Birthday and had willingly gone along with his friends. Not a good decision he later learned as he was being frisked by an undercover policeman their "leader" had propositioned for a birthday strip. Thank heaven's she had been understanding and had at least let him off with a warning. The evening could have

been a total disaster instead of being just another night out with the "boys." He hadn't celebrated one since -- and no one in his family ever remembered to call. The officer would just as soon forget about it.

> "Commander Jonathan!" A voice piped out from the corridor he had just walked past and he jumped when it was accompanied by a blond torpedo in the shape of Cailin Wolenczak.

> She threw herself at his legs and gave them a tight hug before stepping back and grinning up at him. Behind her, Lucas stood, biting his lips together to keep from laughing out loud at the commander's stunned expression.

> "Um, hello Cailin, Lucas. Uh, how are you?" he asked, confused by Cailin's behavior. While she was usually a very affectionate little girl, she tended to be reserved around some of the crew she didn't know very well. Apparently he had been relegated to the "well known crew" status. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth when she held her arms up to be picked up.

> "Fine Sir," Lucas said, again fighting back a grin when Ford picked Cailin up, settling her securely -- if a little clumsily -- on his hip. The man didn't have a lot of experience with children.

> "Yeah, we gotta a surprise for you," Cailin said, smile stretching wider.

> Ford blinked. "A surprise, for me? Why?"

> Cailin leaned in closer. "Cause it's your birthday silly," she answered before looking back at her father and holding a hand out for the paper wrapped bundle he had in his hands. She thrust it into the commander's unoccupied hand and slid down from her "perch"; suddenly shy from giving the gift. Instead, she latched onto her father's hand and gestured for the commander to open his gift.

> "How, how did you know it was my birthday?" Ford asked quietly, mind still reeling from the fact that he'd been found out.

> "Saw it in Dr. Kristin's office," Cailin answered, gripping her father's hand even tighter. He'd explained to her last night that, while it was nice of her to be worried about the commander, she still shouldn't have read his personal stuff. Her daddy had called it an 'vasion of privacy and that she shouldn't do it again unless it was really 'portant. She'd promised that she would be careful from then on and they'd gone on to work on the surprise.

> "The doctor's office," Ford said dumbly, staring at them.

> Lucas had the good grace to flush and glance down at the deck before meeting the older man's eyes.

> "She uh, accidentally saw your file, sir."

> "It was a accident. I promise!" Cailin said, blue eyes widening.

> Ford bit back a laugh and kneeled down to her level. "It's okay Cailin. I'm sure it was...and thank you for the present. It was very nice of you, of both of you," his gaze widened to include Lucas in the look and the teenager flushed even more and smiled lightly, not knowing what else to do.

> "Well, are you gonna open it, or what?" Cailin asked impatiently, wanting to see if their gift was appreciated or not.

> Ford let his smile break through and he stood back up, bringing the small package forward. He slowly ripped into the paper, peeling it away carefully so as not to rip the paper too much. Inside was a piece of white construction paper folded sloppily in quarters and a disc. Cailin looked up at him expectantly and Lucas mimed opening the paper over her head -- trying to give Ford a clue as to what to do.

> Opening the paper, Ford found his name written out in different colored magic marker; at least he thought it was his name. A "F" and

a "t" were written fairly legibly and below the other colored "letters" was a birthday cake with a lot of candles stuck in it at different angles. At the bottom was a clearly written "Happy Birthday," and he caught the faint smudges of a pencil lead beneath the colored letters. Lucas must have traced those out for Cailin to follow.

> "I made the card all by myself...or mostly. Do you like it?" Cailin asked looking at the commander apprehensively.

> "Yes, I do, very much. It's very...colorful." The smile he earned for that remark was more than enough to bring out his own and Ford found himself laughing softly along with Lucas as the little girl once again attached herself the commander's leg.

> "Come on," she said, grabbing his hand and pulling him the rest of his way to his quarters - Lucas trailing them. "You have to look at the rest of your present."

> Once the trio was inside, Cailin gestured for the disc and -- once she had it -- climbed up onto the desk chair and inserted the disc into the computer, waiting for it to load. Lucas came up behind her to watch as she carefully input the commands and Ford stood behind them -- watching as Lucas unobtrusively led Cailin through the first stages. The little girl was already good on the computer and her father was being careful to show her what to do without seeming to "correct" her when she did something wrong.

> "C'mere please," she said, climbing down and pushing the commander gently into his chair before climbing back up into his lap. "Daddy and I put this together for you. I chose all the pictures and colors and he put it all together with music and all the _cool_ stuff."

> Ford, Lucas and Cailin sat for the next few minutes, watching as the present unfolded. It was a multi-media presentation very skillfully put together with pictures of the crew -- both on and off duty -- with music woven in between the pictures, seeming to bind them all together into one cohesive "story." The older man was hard pressed not to laugh when a picture of Ben flashed up -- chagrined look on his face as egg ran runnily down his hair and Miguel standing next to him, face red from laughing so hard. More pictures followed, some weaving across the screen, some scrolling up and down and left to right, while others seemed to jump across. It must have taken hours to put together and Ford felt his heart lighten and gratitude fill it when he thought of the work the pair had put into it.

> "Thank you. That was just...incredible," he said when it was over.

> Cailin smiled while Lucas shook the hand offered to him.

> "Um, you're welcome, Sir. Happy birthday," Lucas said, not quite knowing how to react to the gratitude he saw in the commander's eyes. Instead he lapsed into silence, a smile on his face as Cailin said it for him.

> "You're welcome Commander Jonathan. I'm glad you liked your present. Happy Birthday," she said -- and she gave him a tight hug; which he returned wholeheartedly.<g>

End
file.